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'AND NOTHING BRINGS ME ALL THINGS'

Shakespeare's philosophy of nothing

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The word 'nothing' recurs throughout Shakespeare's writing, from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where Launce asks, 'Can nothing speak?' in response to Valentine's claim that he is 'Nothing' (Shakespeare et al. (2016): III.i.198), to Alonso's castigation of Gonzalo, 'Thou dost talk nothing to me' (II.i.166) in *The Tempest*. But the meaning of 'nothing' in the plays is far from self-evident. Coriolanus's aversion to having his 'nothings monstered' (II.ii.74) is very different from Hamlet's metatheatrical astonishment at the way an actor can display so much emotion 'for nothing! / For Hecuba!' (II.ii.476–7). What is nothing? Doesn't talking about it make it something? Is it nothing in the sense that it is not a thing, or is it the lack of any kind of existence at all? If it is the latter, does it even make sense to ask what it *is*? David Levin (2009: 143) claims that 'one word covered the entire negative spectrum, from the great void to mere nothing' in early modern English, but what exactly is 'mere nothing'? A plethora of meanings is associated with the word 'nothing' in Shakespeare's works: material, fictional, sexual, political, mathematical, theological, and philosophical. In what follows, I will trace some of the philosophical implications of Shakespeare's use of 'nothing'.

In his article surveying the meaning of 'nothing' in Shakespeare, R.S. White (2013: 232; 237–8) points out that Shakespeare was 'clearly intrigued by the teasing philosophical implications of "nothing" when it came to refer not only to "nothing" (an absence) but to a "nothing" (an existence called nothing) named zero', and that 'the evidence suggests that Shakespeare's interest in "nothing" and "ciphers" often includes mathematical connotations but mostly with reference also to metaphorical and philosophical implications'. However, while White does touch on the philosophical nature of Shakespeare's nothing, he mostly focuses on the mathematical sense. Indeed, aside from the Aristotelian notion of nothingness as the primal material nothingness from which the world was created, and the early modern theological interpretation of the Platonic idea that nothingness is the negation of being, there has been very little written on philosophical nothingness in Shakespeare's works.

One philosophical definition of nothing is that which treats the discussion of nothing as nonsense, a mistake in language, because it is contentless. Wittgenstein (1929: 48), for

instance, suggests that talking about being or nothing in general is a misuse of language: 'it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing'. Talking about nothing is illogical, nonsense, and cannot lead to knowledge. It is not that the subject is without value, it is simply that it does not make sense from a logical standpoint. Carnap (1932) argues similarly that the use of 'nothing' as a noun is simply bad logic. Any sentence that relies on 'nothing' in this sense is deprived of meaning: it is a pseudo-statement that has no theoretical content, and cannot have anything to do with knowledge. This does not necessarily mean that questions about the existence of things are worthless; for Carnap (1932: 78), metaphysical thinking is closer to art than to science, it is art that mistakes itself for knowledge, an 'expression of an attitude toward life'. If Shakespeare's use of 'nothing' is nonsense, it leaves little to talk about. But as Shakespeare does use 'nothing' as a noun, and in a meaningful way, 'nothing' as nonsense is irrelevant to Shakespeare's philosophy of nothing. Nevertheless, if Carnap is right, then metaphysical philosophy may still have something meaningful to say about the question of nothing.

Howard Caygill is one of the few critics who have analysed 'nothing' in Shakespeare from a philosophical standpoint. Giving a brief interpretation of what Hegel and Heidegger mean by the term, Caygill (2000: 109) argues that 'Shakespeare's monster of nothing pits equivocation against the unequivocal categories of philosophical ontology, showing how the experience of not-nothing … cannot be reduced to unequivocal states of being'. This is quite an assertion. While it is true that Shakespeare uses 'nothing' in a particularly nuanced and complicated way, Caygill downplays the complexities of ontology and philosophical nothingness. For one thing, the categories of philosophical ontology are not 'unequivocal', and Caygill's (2000: 108) contention that 'the role played by nothing in Shakespeare's dramas is far more equivocal than anything dreamt of in philosophy' is a grand claim to make based on an extremely brief explanation of the philosophy of nothing. According to Caygill (2000: 107), 'For philosophers, *ex nihilo, nihil fit* marks the beginning of a philosophical drama in which the equivocal character of nothing is neutralised by the negation of nothing becoming the affirmation of being'. However, while this applies to Hegel, it is not univocally the case for all philosophy. Both Schelling (1834) and Heidegger (1929) take Hegel to task for presupposing the primacy of being over nothing, and many accounts of nothing do not just affirm being through nothing. For instance, Adorno's (1966) negative dialectics is concerned with what remains after determinate negation, and rejects the idea that nothing can ever be fully incorporated into being. For Merleau-Ponty (1964: 52), the thinking self is not being but 'the "nothing", the "void", which has the capacity for receiving the plenitude of the world'. Nothing is not negated by the world; it never becomes being, although it may appear to. Heidegger uses 'nothing' to refer to several distinct ideas at different points in his career, but his primary contention about nothing is that humans have a fundamental and constant idea of nothing. Contra Hegel, Heidegger (1929: 86) argues that, without a basic understanding of nothing, we would not be able to negate anything, since the power to negate things must come from a prior understanding of nothingness: 'the nothing is more originary than the "not" and negation … negation as an act of the intellect, and thereby the intellect itself, are somehow dependent upon the nothing'. For Heidegger (1935: 32–3), nothing is that which we require to understand that things exist, it is not the negation of being, but a constant counterpart to being, and cannot ever be part of being: 'Insofar as beings stand up against the extreme possibility

of not-Being, they themselves stand in Being, and yet they have never thereby overtaken and overcome the possibility of not-Being'. Thus nothing can never be negated; it remains in the background of our understanding, and can be experienced only in exceptional circumstances.

It is only possible to compare Shakespeare's treatment of nothing with philosophical nothing if the two are dealing with the same kind of nothingness, that is, nothing as the lack of all being. It is therefore important to establish what Shakespeare means by 'nothing', or, more specifically, what he means by *being* nothing when he writes lines such as 'I am nothing', 'You are nothing', 'I was nothing', or 'I must nothing be'. Variations of these lines recur in many plays, spoken by characters who are experiencing moments of severe crisis. Being nothing is evidently different from being king, or being a tree; it is a form of existence, but one which has no predicates which would give it value. If one can *be* nothing, then Shakespeare's 'nothing' must be different from the philosophical accounts of nothingness such as Hegel's, where nothing is the negation of being. Saying that Shakespeare creates a 'condition of not-nothing, a state that is neither being nor nothing' (Caygill (2000: 107)), ignores how Shakespeare uses the word 'nothing'. To respect Shakespeare's treatment of nothing, it is better to make a distinction between being, nothing, and *non-being*, where non-being is the lack of any being at all. But if nothing is not the lack of being, what is it? This is an ontological question: what is nothing in Shakespeare's works? How does it differ from being, or non-being? The threshold moments between being and non-being – and especially the moments when a character contemplates or consciously makes the transition between life and death – are the moments that help to reveal where nothing lies in the ontological spectrum of Shakespeare's plays.

With life and death, the threshold is both physical and metaphysical. 'I know when one is dead and when one lives' (V.iii.234), Lear declares when Cordelia dies: it is obvious when somebody is dead physically. But partly because he is not quite in his right mind, Lear is certain and yet uncertain, checking for signs of life in Cordelia over and over again, saying, 'If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why, then, she lives' (V.iii.236–7), and again, 'This feather stirs. She lives!' (V.iii.239). She might be on the threshold of death, or she might have crossed it. Although we know when someone is dead physically, it is hard to judge when the value of that life changes. When does someone cease to be what makes them what they are? This threshold between life and death is made painfully clear in Anthony's failed suicide in *Anthony and Cleopatra*: 'How, Not dead? Not dead? / The guard, ho! O, dispatch me!' (IV.xv.103–4). Although Anthony can bring himself to the threshold where his state will change from alive to dead, death is not ultimately his, or anyone's, to command. He can start to cross that threshold of his own volition, but he cannot choose the point at which he actually dies. Suicide may seem like one of the ultimate acts in which one takes charge of one's own life, dignity, and destiny, but it relies on something that is not within one's control. At some point on the threshold between life and death one stops being an agent of one's actions. As Brian Cummings (2013: 272) points out, 'We reach unto death, but death in the end comes in its own time. We can want it, but we cannot make it happen. Death meets us halfway, even in the action of suicide'. Anthony apparently thinks otherwise. Before his failed suicide, he says 'I will be / A bridegroom in my death and run into't / As to a lover's bed' (IV.xiv.99–101). In this image, the volition is entirely on his side; death is something passive, like a sexually compliant bride, something he runs to embrace.

Even after he fails to kill himself immediately, Anthony's idea of himself does not change. He claims, 'Not Caesar's valor hath ov'rthrown Anthony, / But Anthony's hath triumphed on itself' (IV.xv.15–16), and he again refers to himself as 'a Roman, by a Roman / Valiantly vanquished' (IV.xv.59–60). Of course, Anthony is responsible for his own death: he dies of the wound that he inflicted on himself, and nobody helps to kill him despite his pleas. But the play shows him less in control of his death than he might like to believe. Death, like Cleopatra, is not going to lie there patiently and receive Anthony in his passion. He may wish to think of himself as running over the threshold into death, but he is pulled over slowly instead. In contrast, Cleopatra proclaims her suicide by saying, 'what's brave, what's noble, / Let's do't after the high Roman fashion / And make death proud to take us' (IV.xv.91–2). She does not directly state that she is going to kill herself; she is going to *let* death take her. She will take herself to the threshold, and allow death to take her over it. Cleopatra's desire for death is always framed in this way: 'Where art thou, death? / Come hither, come! Come, come, and take a queen / Worth many babes and beggars!' (V.ii.45–7). As she says in Act V, suicide is 'that thing that ends all other deeds' (V.ii.5). It is the moment when one gives up the ability to act. It is only an action up to the point where it ceases to be an action taken *by* someone, because that someone ceases to be.

The uncontrollable nature of the transition from life to death is one of the things that haunts Hamlet's soliloquy beginning 'To be or not to be'. Hamlet can only think about what it means 'not to be' as a negation of what 'is'. 'Not to be' is 'to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them' (III.i.58). It is the act of ending his troubles, the destruction of existing pain. But while Hamlet can imagine the attempt to end what 'is', he cannot go beyond it into what 'is not'; it is a threshold that he cannot cross in his mind. Endeavouring to describe what happens at the end of existence, Hamlet equates 'to die' with 'to sleep – / No more' (III.i.59–60; my punctuation). Trying to cross the threshold between life and death in his imagination, he ends up drawing for comparisons on familiar states of being – in this case sleep. As in Horatio's last words to Hamlet, 'Goodnight, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest' (V.ii.337–8), Hamlet's is a description of death from the outside: it is to the living onlooker that the dead look as though they are asleep, and thinking about sleep is the closest Hamlet can get to imagining himself in that state. He goes on, 'To die, to sleep; / To sleep, perchance to dream' (III.i.63–4); his imagination stretches to the afterlife, to being after death. As Cummings (2013: 199) argues, 'It is the continuation of existence after death that is the most frightening possibility. Non-existence is the release, the dissolution, of the body from its torments of being'. Hamlet cannot escape from existence and all it entails even in his conception of death, for if death is sleep, there will be dreams. Ultimately, Hamlet cannot imagine himself in a state of non-being; the threshold between life and death cannot be crossed in his mind, because the moment when he might understand non-being is the moment when he would cease to be able to understand anything.

But life and death are rather narrow conceptions of being and non-being. From the perspective of the one dying, death is the end of being, the transition from being to non-being, but for those who are left behind by the dead, there is still a sort of being in death. For Lear, Cordelia's dead body is still Cordelia. She has not suddenly stopped existing, yet she is not exactly what she was. Death is the moment when something ceases to be what makes it what it is. The dead Cordelia exists in some form, but she is not meaningful as everything that made her Cordelia. This is especially noticeable in the

case of plays like *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cymbeline*, where a character is temporarily perceived as dead. Even though neither Juliet and Innogen are actually dead, these situations reveal how the interpersonal meaning of someone's life changes with death. Indeed, considering that the plot progression depends on the change in significance of the 'dead' person, death is anything but lacking in meaning. The significance of the living person comes into perspective most of all when they have died, because the moment they lose the meaning they had is the moment their significance becomes most apparent.

If death changes the significance of someone's being, but does not dispose of their being entirely, then being is something like meaningful presence, and non-being is the lack of any kind of manifestation, the lack of presence. Non-being is similar to but not the same as death; it is more akin to not having been born. 'Nothing' as Shakespeare uses the term, is neither being nor non-being; it serves as a threshold between the two that is distinctly closer to being than it is to non-being. If being is meaningful presence, and non-being is the lack of presence, then nothing applies to two states: non-meaningful presence, or meaningful lack of presence. Thus, the dead Cordelia is a sort of nothing; she has some form of being even after death, since her body still has physical presence, but she is not meaningful in the way she was when alive. A similar definition applies to whatever lacks material presence, that is, whatever is no-thing, but retains a meaning. For instance, those who are no longer alive but are remembered have a sort of being involved in memory, even if they do not have corporeal existence: they are a meaningful lack of presence. In the same way, fictional characters are nothing, inasmuch as they are meaningful, but not present. In mathematical terms, nothing is like the zero, which denotes nothingness, but exists insofar as it is a manipulable symbol rather than inexpressible non-being. As the fool says to King Lear, 'thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing' (I.iv.161–2). The cipher, the zero, is nothing, a symbol that represents the threshold between being and non-being, and a sign denoting the lack of value.

Cummings (2013: 203) claims that when Hamlet says death is 'a consummation / Devoutly to be wished' (III.i.63–4), 'he is thinking of what Richard II is thinking of in his final soliloquy, "being nothing"'. But while there may be a hint of mortality in the line, Richard's 'being nothing' does not necessarily mean death. When Lysander says 'he is dead; he is nothing' (V.i.297–8) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he obviously means 'nothing' as in death. But this is a rare case. Most of the time, 'nothing' is used of characters who are still clearly alive. When the fool says 'thou art nothing' to Lear, he certainly does not mean that Lear has no being or that Lear is dead. The same goes for Edgar's declaration 'Edgar I nothing am' (*King Lear*, II.iii.21), or Richard II's 'Ay, no; no, ay – for I must nothing be' (IV.i.194), and the end of *Coriolanus* when Cominius gives an account of his parley with Coriolanus:

> Coriolanus
> He would not answer to; forbade all names.
> He was a kind of nothing, titleless,
> Till he had forged himself a name o'th' fire
> Of burning Rome.
>
> (V.i.11–15)

In these instances, 'nothing' is not death; it is more like a state of meaninglessness: presence without significance. It is not philosophical non-being, but a state of heightened awareness of philosophical non-being, an experience akin to the state Heidegger (1929: 90) calls anxiety:

> In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings – and not nothing. But this 'and not nothing' we add in our talk is not some kind of appended clarification. Rather, it makes possible in advance the manifestness of beings in general. The essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings Da-sein for the first time before beings as such.

For Heidegger, non-being is 'the originally nihilating nothing' which gives us the power of negation: it is because we have an instinctual understanding of non-being that we can negate things. Nothingness relies on the negating power of non-being, but insofar as we can never completely not be, being nothing is the closest experience to non-being we can have. Because it removes one from full being, when one is nothing one becomes aware of what it means to be. It is like being a zero, not a proper number but still not entirely non-existent. The state of nothingness provides a mid-point between being and non-being that shows us that we are not non-being but that full being is more than mere existence. In the nothingness that happens when ordinary life is suspended, the beings that we are and the beings we live alongside – things that we normally take for granted – are revealed. Thus, the characters that say 'I am nothing' are those whose ordinary lives have been drained of meaning: Innogen, who thinks that Posthumous is dead; Edgar, who is being hunted down for allegedly plotting patricide; Richard II, who has been deposed and lacks any way of understanding himself that would make his existence meaningful again; and Lear, who has given everything away and can no longer recognise what he is. These characters are present, they have being, but they have ceased to be what made them what they were. They are nothing, because it was their meaning that made them what they were. A telling moment is at the end of *Measure for Measure*, when the Duke says to Mariana, 'you are nothing then: neither maid, widow, nor wife' (V.i.182); if Mariana does not have a social identity, a discernible meaning, then she is nothing.

Being is always being something, so to be nothing appears to contradict existence. But by using 'nothing' to mean something other than the utter lack of being, Shakespeare reveals something fundamental about what humans are and how we are able to understand that we exist. What he reveals is the nothingness of human being, that is, the nothingness we must be in order to be and to understand being. This chimes with Merleau-Ponty's (1964: 52) theory that

> From the moment that I conceive of myself as negativity and the world as positivity, there is no longer any interaction. I go with my whole self to meet a massive world; between it and myself there is neither any point of encounter nor point of reflection, since it is Being and I am nothing.

Being can make sense only in relation with nothing, that is, in a state in which the negating power of non-being is felt. Nothingness thus has a twofold function: human

beings must be nothing in order to be capable of being something, and must therefore *experience* being nothing in order to *understand* being. To clarify, being is the state of meaningfulness we have by existing within a meaningful world. A human being can thus exist without fully being, in the state of nothingness when this meaningful world withdraws and ceases to define us. We are ordinarily filled with the positivity of the world and that we do not notice the negativity of our existence, but in moments when the world that defines us recedes we are left bare, and able to see the meaningfulness of that which defined us. By navigating this threshold space between being and non-being, Shakespeare exposes what it means to be something, to make sense. Thus, when Richard II says,

> Nor I nor any man that but man is
> With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
> With being nothing.
>
> (V.v.39–41)

he shows that being *something* is the proper state of things, but that this fact is only noticeable when one is nothing. Richard took his kingship for granted, failed to see that it was not an inherent part of him, but has come to realise his nothingness by the end. It takes the suspension of meaning for him to understand that meaning was there in the first place. This is why Richard feels he needs to be 'eased / With being nothing'. Meaning becomes more meaningful in light of nothingness.

Shakespeare's 'nothing' is not nihilism, because in his plays being 'nothing' reveals that the world *is* something, that it *does* have meaning, not that it is meaningless. It shows that what we are, what we do, and what we understand is imbued with meaning. This does not mean that nothing is significant only as an affirmation of being. Being nothing reveals one's incorrect understanding of being. In Richard's case, being nothing shows him that his understanding of being was flawed to begin with: he was not a divine king. And if he cannot return to what he thought he was, it is because the world has changed, or because it was never what it was perceived to be in the first place. The fact that we can be nothing reveals that being something is dependent on our existence within a world. By exposing what is, nothing shows what is not, and what could be. However, the lack of an essential self does not mean that we are radically free to be what we wish to be, since we are powerless to decide what sort of world we are born into. The way the world happens to be meaningful is not entirely within one's control. It is not possible to live in a constant state of nothingness, because the very moment everything is drained of meaning, the meaningfulness of the world becomes apparent. The retreat into nothing itself propels one into being again because it forces one to understand the value of the world and the fact that any suspension of this meaning can only be temporary: nothingness forces one to see oneself as existing in a meaningful world that makes one be something in relation to it. This is why Innogen says 'I am nothing; or if not, / Nothing to be were better' (IV.ii.367–8): she does not dwell on nothing as Richard does; she realises at once that to be nothing is still a form of being, that she is not non-existent. Innogen's reiteration of 'nothing' in 'nothing to be were better' shows that, while she wishes she could stay in a state of nothingness, she realises that that her very ability to explain herself requires a meaningful understanding of herself as existing within a world, making her not-nothing. Unlike Richard's indulgence in the

state of nothingness, Innogen's realisation that her woes do not make her meaningless is inherently redemptive. In just two lines, Shakespeare shows absolute despair reducing someone to nothingness, and that nothingness nudging her back into meaningful being again, even if that meaningful being is not necessarily one she desires.

Shakespeare continually plays with the many meanings of 'nothing', from the social to the sexual, but there is a peculiarly philosophical dimension reinforcing the idea of 'being nothing' in his plays. A philosophical examination of these moments makes it apparent that Shakespeare's nothing discloses a threshold between being and non-being that evokes a sense of non-being, and reveals what being is without affirming it at the expense of nothing. It is clear that Shakespeare's conception of existence is not limited to life and death, but deals with the importance of nothingness in our understanding of subtler and more complicated states of being, and in our understanding of being more generally. Shakespeare's philosophical use of 'nothing' creates an awareness not only of what we are and that we are, but also of what we are not and what we could be. Through 'nothing' Shakespeare shows that existence is filled with meaning and presence, and that what is could be otherwise.[1]

Related topics

See Chapters 23, 25, 27

Note

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Further reading

Elton, W.R., 1988. King Lear *and the Gods*. Kentucky, KY: The University Press of Kentucky. This classic study of whether there is a theological dimension to *King Lear* contains a section on theological nothingness and how God created the world from nothing (*ex nihilo*), providing an introduction to a key early modern conception of nothingness.

Grazia, M. de, 1996. The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece. In: M. de Grazia, M. Quilligan and P. Stallybrass, eds. *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17–42. This chapter is a study of early modern subjectivity from a materialist perspective. Drawing on historical studies and the idea that nothing is an absence of matter, Margreta de Grazia argues that, in the early modern period, *having* nothing and *being* nothing amount to the same thing.

Rotman, B., 1987. *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. This book on the history of mathematics includes a section on Shakespeare, and points out that zero, or the cipher, was a relatively new concept in England, arriving sometime in the thirteenth century, but only gaining wide acceptance in Shakespeare's lifetime as Roman numerals were displaced by Arabic numerals.

Sheerin, B., 2013. Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignties of King Lear. *Studies in Philology*, 110(4): 789–811. Brian Sheerin's political reading of 'nothing' in Shakespeare draws on Agamben's theory of 'bare life' and early modern historical tracts to argue that *King Lear* shows that the ideal sovereign is a sort of nothingness, a 'present absence' transparently moving according to the will of the people.

Willbern, D., 1980. Shakespeare's Nothing. In: M.M. Schwartz and C. Kahn, eds. *Representing Shakespeare*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 244–63. David Willbern's study is an example of a psychoanalytic approach to the question of 'nothing' in Shakespeare. Taking the early modern slang use of 'nothing'

for female genitalia as a starting point, Willbern's paper associates 'nothing' in the general sense with 'nothing' in the genital and reproductive sense to argue for a generative concept of nothing.

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